

BRIDGING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

*THE ROLE OF
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
FOR TEACHERS*



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Bridging the Achievement Gap: The Role of Professional Development for Teachers

“The imperative for professionals, policymakers and the public at large to recognize that performance-based accountability, if it is to do what it was intended to do—improve the quality of educational experience for all students and increase the performance of schools—requires a strategy for investing in the knowledge and skill of educators.” (Elmore, 2002, p. 5)

Improving student achievement has always been at the forefront of major educational reform movements (Dilworth & Imig, 1995; Goals 2000, 2001). The academic success of students can be significantly affected by teachers’ access and participation in quality professional development activities (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Gurskey, 2002). The rhetoric calling for “quality teachers” to implement higher student achievement has never been greater nor more appropriate than in the shadow of No Child Left Behind legislation. In order for all students (regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or geographical location) to have access to first-rate educational experiences, the nation’s teachers must be provided with access to quality professional development. This report will examine the status of professional development, identify the characteristics of effective professional development and provide policy recommendations for developing effective professional development programs for teachers.

The Status of Professional Development for Teachers

One of the fallacies of the American education system seems to be that we think teachers learn most (if not all) of what they need to know about teaching prior to entering the classroom (Elmore, 2002). The idea that the teaching practitioner operating as a soloist is the best method of delivering education to students today is riddled with faults. The thought that a teacher’s only work-related duty is to deliver instruction to students severely inhibits the teacher’s cultivation of new knowledge, methods and skills.

“More often than not, staff development for teachers is fragmented and incoherent, lacks intellectual rigor, fails to build on existing knowledge and skills and does little to assist them with the day-to-day challenges of improving student learning” (Sparks, 2002, p. 9-1). Much of the current research on staff development suggests that current models of professional development are ineffective (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Wang, Frechtling, & Sanders, 1999). The goal of improving teaching can best be met by moving educators away from the view that teaching is an isolated event. In order for teaching to improve, teachers must begin to evaluate their work and examine their professional practices (Heibert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2004).

Typical teacher attitudes toward professional development were reflected in a recent national study conducted by Public Agenda (Farkas, Johnson & Duffett, 2003). When asked about the recent professional development in which they had participated, only 50% reported that the experience had made them better teachers. Thirty-eight percent of the teachers described their professional development as not being

immediately useful in the classroom. Compared to high school teachers, elementary teachers were more likely to describe their recent professional development as helping them to become better teachers (57%, compared to 34%). Sixty-four percent of elementary teachers reported that recent professional development activities were immediately useful in the classroom, while only 41% of secondary teachers reported that their professional development activities were immediately useful (Farkas, Johnson & Duffett).

The professional development provisions and mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) notwithstanding, a recent national survey conducted by the National Staff Development Council found that 47% of the more than 2000 educators responding felt the law was having no discernible effects on professional development (Mizell, 2004). Despite the NCLB provisions to regularly evaluate the impact of professional development on teacher effectiveness and student achievement, one-third of those responding reported about the same amount of evaluation as before the enactment of NCLB. Twenty percent of the respondents reported that professional development (in school systems they knew about) was not evaluated in relation to its effect on teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Although discouraged by NCLB, 34% of the respondents reported that one-day or short-term workshops were occurring at about the same frequency as two years ago (survey conducted in December 2003 – February 2004). Eleven percent reported an increase in the one-shot workshop model of professional development.

Teachers, like most adults, learn by participating in activities (hands-on learning), by collaborating with other professionals and by reflecting on their work. Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin & Milbrey (1995) stated that “to understand deeply, teachers must learn about, see and experience successful learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices” (p. 600). The “one-shot workshop” has long been the primary modality of delivering professional development in most school systems. Research indicates that this is one of the least effective methods of training adults (Birman, Desimone, Garet & Porter, 2000; Rhoton & Stiles, 2002). Teachers must be provided with opportunities to learn how to question, analyze and modify instruction to teach challenging content to today’s students (Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin & Milbrey 1995).

It appears that the current research on learning is not being practiced on our educators. Ann Lieberman (1995) reported that “what everyone wants for students – a wide array of learning opportunities that engage students in experiencing, creating, and solving real problems, using their own experiences and working with others – is for some reason denied to teachers when they are learners”. Teachers are given the message that outsiders’ views, ideas and practices are more valued than their own. Schools and school systems must become “learning organizations” where the teacher is an equal and active learner in the process (Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin & Milbrey 1995; Elmore, 2002; Lieberman, 1995; Sparks, 2002). Elmore (2002) sums it up best when he states: “Spending more money on existing professional development activities, as most are presently designed, is unlikely to have any significant effect on either the knowledge and skill of educators or on the performance of students” (p.6).

What is “Quality” Professional Development?

Professional development has been defined as a systematic attempt to bring about transformation in the classroom practices of teachers (Gurskey, 2002). This transformation comes in the form of a changing of attitudes, practices and beliefs, all of which contribute to higher learning outcomes for students. Most teachers measure success by their pupils’ behaviors and activities. Teachers are attracted to professional development in the belief that it will expand their knowledge and teaching skills. A review of current literature offers six domains which describe the basic canons of high-quality staff development.

Teacher-Driven

Teachers know best when it comes to what their needs are. Ownership in staff development is a primary component of a successful quality program. Effective staff development practices must be “connected to and derived from teachers’ work with their students” (Darling – Hammond, *et.al*, 1995, p. 599). Barth (1990) suggested that collegiality is one of the most important steps in achieving effective school improvement. In a collegial environment, teachers will talk about their teaching in a concrete and precise manner. Teachers will observe each other practicing the art of teaching and provide feedback which leads to reflection by the teacher. High-quality professional development should not only focus on the teacher but should also nurture the intellectual and leadership capacities of the teachers (Goals 2000, 2001). Teacher-driven professional development must be viewed as a core element of quality education which is as essential to the education process as classroom instruction (Cook & Fine, 1996).

Teachers believe the best professional development is the kind they select for themselves. Using this model, they can participate in professional development focused on specific self-identified needs and weaknesses (Farkas, Johnson & Duffett, 2003).

Ongoing and Sustained

One of the key characteristics of quality professional development is that the training must be “ongoing and sustained” (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Research Brief, 2003; Birman *et.al*, 2000; Kedzior & Fifield, 2004; McDiarmid, 1995). Activities which are offered over longer durations tend to have greater impact than those typically classified as one-shot workshops. Longer, focused workshops/training allow the participants to share work, develop new teaching strategies and collaborate with peers, all of which contribute to robust learning experiences for children. Extended professional development activities promote a richer environment for the participants and allow teachers to develop clear connections between the material presented and their classroom experiences (Birman *et. al*).

School-Based and Job-Embedded

Effective professional development models are those delivered in a manner that is job-embedded. In order for teachers to embrace the changes that professional development offers, a sustained daily opportunity to practice its benefits must be available. The general public's view of teaching is that the only task assigned to the teacher is to deliver approximately five hours of instruction per day. School-based, job-embedded professional development may be one of the greatest improvements that we can make in our schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Goals 2000, 2001; Kedizore & Fifield, 2004).

Schools must become an active learning environment for teachers as well as for the pupils. With the current model of "in-service days" for professional development, it is nearly impossible to sustain an atmosphere of innovation and collaboration over the long haul (Sparks, 2002). The current system provides few opportunities for teachers to engage in learning about their profession (Elmore, 2002).

Efficient professional development is primarily school-based and built into the daily work of teachers (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). In order for our teachers to learn to teach in new ways, professional development must be redefined as a central part of teaching. "It can no longer be add-on activities tacked onto the school day, week or year. It must be woven into the teachers' daily work" (McDiarmid, 1995, p.3).

Content-Focused

The degree to which professional development was focused on content knowledge has been directly related to teachers' reported increases in pupil knowledge and skills (Birman et al., 2000). However, teachers do not equate generic (one-shot workshop) professional development activities with student performance improvement (Cohen & Hill, 1998). As educational standards are increased, it is extremely important that educators develop a highly sophisticated understanding of subject content. Content-focused professional development leads to greater subject understanding.

Driven by Student Needs

The National Staff Development Council (2001) suggests that staff development must focus on improvement in learning for all students. Staff development should use disaggregated student data to determine teacher learning priorities. Teachers should be given the opportunity to request professional development activities which address specific pupil needs (increasing student performance) on a school-by-school basis (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Goals 2000, 2001). Elmore (2002) takes the suggestion one step further when he suggests that professional development must be connected with issues of instruction and student learning in the context of the teacher's actual classroom. An examination of student performance should ultimately drive the agenda for effective professional development (Gurskey, 2003).

Adult Learning-Focused

Teachers, as adult learners, should have adequate opportunities for learning. The field of education is one of the few professional areas where on-the-job training has not been highly regarded. Saturn automobile employees spend about 5% of their work time on learning using on-the-job professional development (Elmore, 2002). Many education reformers recommend that teachers spend up to 20% of their time in professional development activities (Darling – Hammond, 1990). Today’s agenda of educational reform demands that teachers update their skills on a continuous basis. The deep understanding required to teach in today’s classrooms can be gained only through learning-centered experiences (Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, 1995). Carnegie Corporation’s treatise, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986), also emphasized the need for continued learning by our teachers.

Teachers’ learning may be more like the way students learn than we have previously thought (Lieberman, 1995). The adult learning process relies heavily upon a collaborative model which allows participants to work with colleagues in the actual setting in which the work is performed (classrooms). Teachers must be given the opportunity to share successes and reflect on failures.

Summary

The literature pertaining to professional development for teachers is clear. Pupils learn more from high-quality teaching. One of the surest ways to increase the quality of our teaching force is to provide professional development programs that are:

- teacher-driven
- ongoing and sustained
- school-based and job-embedded
- content-focused
- focused on student needs
- using adult learning strategies

Professional development is most effective when it is made accessible to all educators and becomes a part of a system-wide effort to improve classroom instruction. The creation of a new model of professional development will require support from a multitude of contributors—schools, institutions of higher education, teachers, administrators, legislators and, most important of all, the public.

An extensive body of research suggests that creating smaller, learner-centered and more personal school settings will increase teacher engagement in the learning process (Carroll, Fulton, Abercrombie & Yoon, 2004). Teachers are attracted to such environments, as this shared sense of responsibility translates into an improved capacity for growth and improvement. Hiring well-prepared teachers is essential but not sufficient. We must provide teachers with appropriate professional development opportunities that ensure access to resources and assistance on an on going basis. If we fail to do so, high-need schools will continue to be *high-need*.

Policy Recommendations for Developing Effective Teacher Professional Development Programs

- Create a professional development task force that includes the following stakeholders:
 - State-level policymakers
 - Teachers
 - School administrators
 - Representatives from teacher education programs (higher education)
 - Business and industry leaders
- Adopt policies that will provide job-embedded time for professional development. Some examples include:
 - Adding time to extend the school day
 - Extracting time from existing schedules
 - Utilization of creative staffing patterns
- Create a structure of teacher “learning communities,” whereby teachers provide the input as to the type of professional development needed. Professional development learning communities should be “school-based” for maximum impact. The creation of the communities should:
 - Receive adequate funding to sustain the initiative
 - Be established in an environment which nurtures high-quality learning opportunities for teachers
 - Recognize that the life cycle of all professional development initiatives is fluid– maintain flexibility
 - Actively encourage collegial learning opportunities for all teachers
 - Provide a professional atmosphere that reduces the isolation of teachers
 - Provide incentives that encourage teachers to become true learners
- Develop standards-based professional development programs; align the licensing, testing and evaluation of teachers with professional association standards (NBPTS; NCTM; NCATE).
- Provide local and state incentives for teachers to become certified as National Board-Certified Teachers.
- Develop a resource allocation model which favors the adult learning model over other types of training.
- Implement strategies to ensure that professional development activities are directly linked with local pupil needs/deficiencies.
- Ensure that professional development activities are research-based and reflect best practices.
- Promote professional development programs that provide options for addressing individual and professional development needs.

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